

Message Text

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TO USDEL SECRETARY IMMEDIATE

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EXDIS - FOR THE SECRETARY FROM AHERNE, THROUGH EAGLEBURGER

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS:OVIP (KISSINGER, HENRY A.)

SUBJECT: CAMPAIGN UPDATE ON THE EVE OF THE FIRST DEBATE

1. SINCE YOUR DEPARTURE FOR AFRICA, THERE HAS BEEN A RATHER
DRAMATIC SHIFT IN THE TENOR OF THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN.
WHILE CARTER WAS CONSIDERED A HEAVY FAVORITE ON LABOR DAY,
THE CONSENSUS AMONG POLITICAL COMMENTATORS TODAY IS THAT
HIS CAMPAIGN HAS BEEN FALTERING BADLY AND THE PRESIDENTIAL
RACE IS NOW CONSIDERED A VIRTUAL TOSS-UP. IN THE EYES OF
MANY, THE "REAL" CAMPAIGN BEGINS TONIGHT IN THE FIRST TELE-
VISED DEBATE BETWEEN THE CANDIDATES. THE FOLLOWING OBSER-
VATIONS ARE MADE TO GIVE YOU A FEELING FOR THE NEW MOOD OF
THE COUNTRY AS FORD AND CARTER ENTER THEIR FIRST DIRECT
CONFRONTATION.

2. FORD AS PRESIDENT--DESPITE A HEAVY AMOUNT OF DERISIVE
PRESS COMMENTARY, FORD'S STRATEGY OF CAMPAIGNING FROM THE
ROSE GARDEN HAS PROVEN TO BE REASONABLY SUCCESSFUL. A
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HARRIS SURVEY YESTERDAY SHOWED THAT A PLURALITY OF VOTERS

NOW THINK THAT MR. FORD IS DOING A GOOD JOB AS PRESIDENT;
WHEREAS TWO OUT OF THREE VOTERS THOUGHT HE WAS DOING A POOR
JOB SIX WEEKS AGO. IN ADDITION, RECENT POLLS HAVE YIELDED
PROMISING RESULTS FOR THE FORD CAMPAIGN IN KEY ELECTORAL
STATES; E.G., ILLINOIS, WHERE A CHICAGO TRIBUNE POLL SHOWS

HIM LEADING CARTER 44 PCT - 41 PCT.

3. CARTER AS CAMPAIGNER--CARTER HAS YET TO TRANSFORM HIS
SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGN STYLE IN THE PRIMARIES INTO AN
EFFECTIVE PRESENTATION FOR THE GENERAL ELECTION. HIS
APPEARANCES, WHILE NUMEROUS, ARE BEING CRITICIZED AS UN-
EXCITING AND LACKLUSTER EVENTS. HIS INVOCATION OF PAST
DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTS LEAVE HIS AUDIENCES COLD; A RECENT
WHISTLESTOP TRAIN RIDE FROM NEW YORK TO PITTSBURGH FAILED
TO IGNITE ANY GREAT ENTHUSIASM IN TRADITIONAL URBAN DEMO -
CRATIC STRONGHOLDS. PARTY PROS REALIZE THAT APATHY AMONG
THE VOTERS PRESENTS A SERIOUS THREAT TO THE DEMOCRATIC
TICKET AND ARE BECOMING CONCERNED ABOUT CARTER'S INABILITY
TO ROUSE THE FAITHFUL IN HIS CAMPAIGN TOURING.

4. CARTER ON TAXES AND ADULTERY--WITHIN THE PAST WEEK,
CARTER INTERVIEWS WITH A.P. AND PLAYBOY HAVE CAUSED GREAT
CONSTERNATION AMONG THE VOTERS, AND RAISED QUESTIONS ABOUT
HIS ABILITY TO CONDUCT HIMSELF WELL IN THE HEAT OF THE
CAMPAIGN.

5. TAX REFORM CONTROVERSY--IN AN A.P. INTERVIEW PUBLISHED
LAST WEEKEND, CARTER WAS ASKED HOW HIS TAX REFORM PROGRAM
WOULD WORK. HE REPLIED THAT HE WOULD PROBABLY TAKE THE
MEDIAN INCOME (AROUND \$13,000) AND LOWER TAXES FOR THOSE
UNDER THAT AMOUNT AND RAISE TAXES FOR THOSE EARNING OVER
THAT AMOUNT. HE ALSO STATED THAT HE WOULD PREFER TO TREAT
ALL INCOME THE SAME FOR TAX PURPOSES--IMPLYING THAT HE
WOULD END HOME MORTGAGE DEDUCTIONS AND ALL OTHER FORMS OF
SHELTERS. WHEN DOLE AND OTHER ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS
CLAIMED THAT CARTER WAS, IN EFFECT, CALLING FOR A TAX IN-
CREASE FOR ALL WHO EARNED OVER \$13,000 A YEAR, CARTER BACK-
TRACKED QUICKLY AND DENIED THAT HE MEANT WHAT HE SAID IN
THE A.P. INTERVIEW. THE PUBLIC HAS BEEN LEFT WITH THE
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IMPRESSION EITHER THAT CARTER WILL RAISE MOST VOTERS'
TAXES OR THAT HE IS VAGUE AND VACILLATING ON YET ANOTHER
KEY ISSUE; AND THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT HE DAMAGED HIMSELF
SERIOUSLY IN THIS CASE.

6. THE PLAYBOY CONTROVERSY--PLAYBOY MAGAZINE, FOR REASONS
WHICH REMAIN UNCLEAR--RELEASED THE TEXT OF AN INTERVIEW
DONE WITH CARTER IN JULY IN WHICH HE CONFESSES TO HAVING

LUSTED AFTER WOMEN IN HIS HEART AND WARNS THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN FAITHFUL IN THEIR MARRIAGES NOT TO JUDGE A MAN WHO "SHACKS UP" AND "SCREWS A BUNCH OF WOMEN" TOO HARSHLY. WHILE HIS CANDOR IS STARTLING, HIS PLOY FOR THE PLAYBOY VOTE IS BACKFIRING, AND HIS JUDGEMENT IS UNDER QUESTION BOTH FOR HIS USE OF MILD VULGARISM AND ALSO FOR GRANTING THE INTERVIEW WITH THIS MAGAZINE IN THE FIRST PLACE.

7. CONCLUSION--

SINCE THE FUROR OVER THE A.P. AND PLAYBOY INTERVIEWS AROSE, CARTER HAS TRIED TO EXTRACT HIMSELF WITH LITTLE SUCCESS. HE HAS APPEARED WORN AND HAGGARD, SNAPPING AT HIS QUESTIONERS IN THE PRESS, AS POLITICAL COMMENTATORS HAVE BEGUN TO SUGGEST THAT HIS FABLED SELF-CONFIDENCE HAS BEEN SERIOUSLY SHAKEN. HIS DEMEANOR SINCE EARLY THIS WEEK HAS BEEN THAT OF A RATTLED AND EDGY MAN; AND HE ENTERS THE FIRST DEBATE IN A CLEARLY DEFENSIVE MOOD.

THE BREAKNECK PACE OF HIS CAMPAIGNING SINCE LABOR DAY HAS PRODUCED NO POSITIVE SIGNS TO COUNTERACT HIS GAFFES ON CLARENCE KELLEY, ABORTION, TAX REFORM, AND ADULTERY. FOR THE FIRST TIME, THE QUESTION OF CARTER'S FUNDAMENTAL JUDGEMENT IS BEING SERIOUSLY DEBATED--SO CARTER ENTERS HIS FIRST DEBATE WITH THE PRESIDENT UNDER SEVERE PRESSURE TO DEMONSTRATE THAT HE IS CAPABLE OF PROVIDING SOUND PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP.

CARTER STILL LEADS IN THE LATEST POLLS, BUT HIS STOCK AMONG THE VOTERS IS FALLING; AND A POOR PERFORMANCE IN THE DEBATE COULD MAKE HIS DOWNWARD TREND IRREVERSIBLE. IN THE WAKE OF THE EVENTS OF THE PAST TWO WEEKS, TONIGHT'S DEBATE ASSUMES AN EVEN MORE CRUCIAL IMPORTANCE FOR CARTER THAN LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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IT DOES FOR FORD. ROBINSON

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